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AUTHOR Catlin, George
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ABSTRACT

The origins of personality traits and emotions have long been a subject of investigation and controversy. Beginning with Freud, an argument has been made from a wide variety of perspectives that early childhood relationships to parents are a primary factor in shaping personality. Within a cognitive paradigm, people's beliefs about themselves and the world are seen as important sources of individual differences. This study empirically examined the relative importance to personality of childhood relationships with parents and current beliefs. Subjects (N=305) were college students who completed questionnaires on parent-child relationships, basic beliefs, and emotions and traits. It was found that childhood relationships with parents generally made their contribution to personality traits through basic beliefs. Differing combinations of basic beliefs were found to account for a considerable amount of the variance in personality traits. Numerous gender differences were noted. (ABL)

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Personality Traits as a Function of Beliefs and Childhood Experience

George Catlin

University of Massachusetts

Abstract

A correlational study was conducted to investigate the association of reports of childhood relationships with parents and current basic beliefs, on the one hand, to personality traits and emotions, on the other. It was found that childhood relationships with parents generally make their contribution to personality traits through basic beliefs. Differing combinations of basic beliefs were found to account for a considerable amount of the variance in personality traits. Numerous gender differences were noted.

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The origins of personality traits and emotions have long been a subject of investigation and controversy. Beginning with Freud, an argument has been made from a wide variety of perspectives that early childhood relationships to parents are a primarily factor in shaping personality. Within a cognitive paradigm, people's beliefs about themselves and the world are seen as important sources of individual differences. The present study empirically examines the relative importance to personality of childhood relationships with parents and current beliefs.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were college students who volunteered to complete a battery of questionnaires for experimental credit. Useable questionnaires were returned by 305 subjects. Of these 196 were females and 109 were males. Ages ranged from 17 to 36, with the vast majority being 18 or 19.

Instruments

Parent-Child Relationships. Numerous scales assessing parent-child relationships have consistently pointed to two important dimensions: acceptance vs rejection and independence encouragement vs too much control (e.g., Parker et al. 1979, Schaefer, 1965; Schaefer and Bell, 1958). The scale that was used in the present study was the Mother-Father-Peer Scale (MFP). It assesses acceptance vs rejection and independence encouragement vs over-protection for mothers and fathers independently. Sample items include "When I was a child, my mother/father encouraged me to make my own decisions," (independence encouragement) and "When I was a child my mother/father didn't like to have me around the house" (acceptance-rejection). All scales had alpha reliabilities greater than .80.

Basic Beliefs. According to Epstein's Cognitive-experiential Self-theory (CEST) (Epstein 1970, 1983), individuals form a set of experientially based beliefs about themselves and the world. These beliefs are understood to be central to personality and the tendency to experience emotions.

For the present study, three components of self esteem, Competence, Likability, and Loveworthiness, were assessed with the short form of the O'Brien-Epstein Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory (1988). Five other basic beliefs, Meaningful Life, Benign World, Just World, Predictable and Controllable World, and the value of Relationships, were assessed by a Basic Beliefs Inventory developed for this research. Each scale consisted of five to 12 items with alpha reliabilities between .60

and .89.

Emotions and Traits. The Primary Emotions and Traits Scale (PETS) was used to assess emotions and traits. It is an adjective checklist that asks how frequently subjects experience 85 different states. It contains subscales derived from factor analysis for four broad traits and three primary emotions. The traits are a general positivity factor, extroversion, neuroticism, and ego strength. The emotions are happiness vs. depression, calmness vs anxiety, and agreeableness vs anger. Reliability coefficients (internal consistency) were all above .80.

Results

After checking for possible colinearity problems, multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the extent to which childhood relationships to parents and current basic beliefs contributed to emotions and traits. In the initial analysis, a hierarchical procedure was used. In the first step, the four relationship to parent variables were considered. In the second step, the eight basic beliefs were considered. Only those variables that were significant at the .05 level were included in the equation. However, once included in the equation, variables were retained even if the entry of subsequent variables reduced their significance level to below .05. Separate analyses were run for males and females. In a second series of analyses, all the variables that entered the equation for a given trait for either gender were forced into the equations for both genders. This made it possible make direct comparisons of contributions of the same factors to a given trait or emotion for the two genders (see Tables 1-7).

Overall, differing amounts of the variance were accounted for depending on the particular traits and emotions. Final values of R^2 ranged from .08 (low anger for females) to .62 (positivity for females) with a median of .33. In general, more of the variance was accounted for in the traits (positivity, ego strength, integration, extroversion and non-neuroticism) than in the emotions (happiness and anger). The median value of R^2 for the traits was .36 while the median value of R^2 for the emotions was .27.

A consistent pattern was found in the contribution of relationships to parents in most of the equations. At least one relationship-to-parent variable made an initial significant contribution to every trait or emotion (for at least one of the genders) except anger. However, once the beliefs were entered into the equation, the contribution of the relationship to parent variable(s) became insignificant.

The most important findings from the regression equations for each of the traits and emotions are summarized below.

Positivity: Not surprisingly. a broad range of beliefs contributed to this most global trait for both males and females. Non-Neuroticism: The belief in the value of relationships is the sole predictor of non-neuroticism for males. For females, Competence and Benign World are the best predictors.

Ego-Strength: The beliefs regarding competence, predictable and Controllable World, and Likability, predicted ego strength for males and females. However, Father Acceptance makes an initial contribution for males whereas mother independence-encouragement makes an initial contribution for females.

Extroversion: As would be expected, Likability is a strong predictor of extroversion. However, for males, Competence accounts for even more of the variance.

Integration: Beliefs in one's competence and the meaningfulness of life make positive contributions to personality integration. However, for both males and females, there is evidence that positive beliefs regarding relationships tend to detract from personality integration. This suggests an integration around an isolated, achievement oriented identity.

Happiness: Competence is the single important factor for males. For both males and females, relationships to mothers make initial contributions to the equation.

Low anger: Especially for males, belief in the value of relationships to others predicted low anger and high agreeableness.

Discussion

The data suggest that in virtually all instances, the contribution of reports of childhood relationships to parents to personality traits and emotions is mediated by basic beliefs. Although correlations cannot establish causation, the findings are at least consistent with the position that personality traits are to a considerable degree shaped by beliefs (.eg., Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1962; Epstein 1980). The findings also identify the specific beliefs that are most strongly associated with particular traits and emotions. The data further reveal interesting gender differences in the relations of beliefs to certain traits and emotions.

The primary limitations of the study regard the instruments it employed. The Primary Emotions and Traits Scale is not a widely accepted measure of personality traits. Also the scales of version of the Basic Beliefs Inventory used in the present study were theoretically, not psychometrically, derived. Replication of the design with a standard personality inventory and the present version of the Basic Beliefs Inventory would further clarify the essential cognitive components of personality traits.

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Table 1

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for overall positivity.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8
Father Indep. Enc.	.26*	.21*	.00	.01	.00	-.01	.01	.03
(Mother Acceptance)		.15	.08	-.04	-.06	-.06	-.06	-.05
Benign World			.70***	.57***	.43***	.37***	.45***	.46***
Competence				.30***	.27***	.23**	.22**	.22**
Meaningful Life					.24*	.24*	.27**	.29**
Likability						.18*	.21*	.23*
Justice							-.21*	-.21*
(Love-worthiness)								-.07
R^2	.07	.09	.43	.52	.55	.58	.60	.60

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8
Mother Acceptance	.33***	.28***	.14*	.05	.04	.06	.01	.00
Father Indep. Enc.		.21**	.11	.11	.09	.08	.07	.06
Meaningful Life			.60***	.51***	.39***	.33***	.30***	.30***
Likability				.33***	.30***	.24***	.19**	.19**
Benign World					.21**	.23***	.23***	.19**
Competence						.18**	.19**	.20***
Love-worthiness							.14*	.13*
(Justice)								.08
R^2	.11	.15	.47	.56	.58	.61	.62	.62

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 2

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for non-neuroticism.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
(Father Indep. Encouragement)	.09	-.12	-.13	-.12
Relationships		.45***	.40**	.36**
(Benign World)			.10	.06
(Competence)				.14
R^2	.01	.17	.17	.19

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Father Indep. Encouragement	.21**	.12	.11	.11
Benign World		.32***	.28***	.20*
Competence			.24***	.24***
(Relationships)				.13
R^2	.04	.14	.19	.20

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 3

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for ego strength.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Father Acceptance	.28**	.28**	.26**	.13	.11
(Mother Indep. Encouragement)		.01	.01	-.03	-.05
Competence			.45***	.42***	.38***
Predictable, Cont. World				.39***	.37***
(Likability)					.13
R^2	.08	.08	.27	.40	.42

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Mother Indep. Encouragement	.27***	.26***	.13	.10	.05
(Father Acceptance)		.05	.09	.03	.04
Competence			.45***	.38***	.33***
Predictable, Cont. World				.29***	.27***
Likability					.18***
R^2	.07	.07	.26	.33	.36

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 4

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for extroversion.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
(Mother Acceptance)	.12	.11	.09	.08	.11	.11
(Mother Indep. Encouragement)		.02	.02	-.03	-.02	-.02
Competence			.44*	.35***	.38***	.38***
Likability				.27**	.29**	.29**
(Meaningful Life)					-.11	-.11
(Love-worthiness)						-.01
R^2	.01	.01	.21	.27	.28	.28

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
Mother Acceptance	.33***	.26***	.16*	.11	.04	.05
Mother Indep. Encouragement		.16*	.06	.07	.06	.04
Likability			.42***	.35***	.29***	.27***
Meaningful Life				.25***	.21**	.18*
Love-worthiness					.19*	.19*
(Competence)						.09
R^2	.11	.13	.28	.34	.36	.36

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 5

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for personality integration.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8
Father Indep. Enc.	.26**	.21	.11	.10	.16	.12	.11	.11
(Mother Indep. Enc.)		.14	.09	.11	.11	.09	.10	.09
Meaningful Life			.40***	.30**	.38**	.34**	.26**	.24*
Competence				.25**	.25**	.22*	.25**	.24*
Love-worthiness					-.21**	-.23*	-.20	-.21*
(Relationships)						.14	.13	.12
(Pred., Cont. Wld.)							.10	.10
(Benign Wolrd)								.04
R^2	.07	.08	.23	.29	.32	.33	.33	.33

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7	Step 8
Mother Indep. Enc.	.20**	.18**	.05	.06	.13	.12	.12	.11
(Father Indep. Enc.)		.04	.05	.01	.01	.00	.02	.02
Competence			.47***	.39***	.35***	.34***	.33***	.33***
Meaningful Life				.22**	.37***	.29**	.36***	.35***
Relationships					-.26**	-.30***	-.24**	-.25**
Pred., Cont. Wld.						.18*	.21*	.21*
Benign World							-.21*	-.21*
(Love-worthiness)								.04
R^2	.04	.04	.24	.29	.33	.35	.37	.37

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 6

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for factors predicting happiness.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
Mother Acceptance	.21*	.19	.17	.16	.17	.18
(Mother Indep. Encouragement)		.06	.06	.03	.03	.03
Competence			.55***	.49***	.51***	.51***
(Likability)				.17	.18	.17
(Meaningful Life)					-.04	-.15
Predictable Cont. World						.14
R^2	.05	.05	.35	.37	.38	.39

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
Mother Indep. Encouragement	.23**	.18*	.16*	.09	.06	.04
(Mother Acceptance)		.12	.01	.04	.00	.00
Meaningful Life			.43***	.34***	.30***	.19*
Competence				.26***	.21**	.20**
Likability					.20**	.20**
Predictable, Cont. World						.18*
R^2	.05	.07	.24	.29	.32	.34

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 7

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for low anger.

Independent Variables	Males Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Relationships	.38***	.49***	.40***
Meaningful Life		-.24*	-.27*
Likability			.23*
R^2	.14	.18	.23

	Females Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Relationships	.26***	.31***	.27**
(Meaningful Life)		-.09	-.11
(Likability)			.10
R^2	.07	.07	.08

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*$p<.05$ **$p<.01$ ***$p<.001$

Table 8

Results of stepwise hierarchical regression analyses for calm, low anxiety.

Males

Independent Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
(Mother Indep. Encouragement)	-.15	-.23*	-.25*
Meaningful Life		.38***	.32**
(Benign World)			.09
R^2	.02	.16	.16

Females

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Mother Indep. Encouragement	.22**	.16*	.16*
Benign World		.28***	.18*
(Meaning)			.15
R^2	.05	.12	.14

Note: Beliefs in parentheses were forced into the equation due to their presence in the equation for the opposite gender.
*$p<.05$ **$p<.01$ ***$p<.001$